

Context of “eyeball” in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*

In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s *Nature*, Emerson describes himself becoming “a transparent eye-ball”, an extended metaphor that may seem odd or nonsensical upon first reading from a 21st century viewpoint. While there is no definitive way that “eyeball” is used within 19th century texts, various genres of texts can provide further context for this image and illustrate that an eyeball is a common literary motif. In the 19th century, eyeballs carry a religious connotation, either being a conduit to see God or for God to judge the world. Furthermore, Emerson’s description of his experience as an eye-ball closely matches the reported experiences of participants in pseudoscientific animal magnetism trials, which also focus on the eyeball. Through these and other contexts, an “eyeball” in the 19th century can be understood to mean the literal definition of the word, but also a connection to God, the spiritual world, fear, vulnerability, and death. These meanings help illustrate the spirituality (both Christian spirituality and secular) of Emerson’s *Nature* and show how the image would be recognized by the original 19th century audience.

Within poetry, eyeballs are repeatedly represented in a religious context, either to see God or for God to see people. A poem, published in the *Carolina Gazette*, tells a story about a parson who draws large crowds.¹ Within the poem, the parson is characterized as a “A Saint on Earth,” by grandmothers who “then roll’d their eyeballs up, and sigh’d.” While they are in front of the parson, the emphasis on rolling their eyeballs up clearly indicate they are making a connection between themselves, the parson, and God. This image illustrates how one’s eyes serve as the way to directly connect with God, which is like how Emerson characterizes his

¹ "Poetry." *Carolina Gazette* (Charleston, South Carolina), 25 July 1818, p. [4]. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

experience as an eyeball. Emerson says he is a “part or particle of God,” and given the context of this poem, the part of God that Emerson occupies is his eyeball.

This connection between eyeballs and God is utilized again in the poem "The Wreath. the King of Zion," published in the Bangor Weekly Register.² The poem discusses the divine power of God and Jesus while intertwining their personal feelings. The narrator asks God to “lead me where my soul shall lose its fears / and from my misty eyeball wipe my tears.” Again, the eyeball is the only place where the narrator and God connect directly. The eyeball has a spiritual connotation that is separate from the body and even from the soul. God is also presented similarly – the narrator describes the “The awful glance of thy [God’s] Omnificent eye.” God’s eye being characterized as omnificent places sight (rather than physical action) at the center of creation. This context furthers Emerson’s *Nature* by suggesting that seeing as an eyeball is an act of creating something. Emerson also blurs the lines between man and God by utilizing the metaphor of an eyeball since it is used to describe both in 19th century texts. The concept of a spiritual eyeball that is almost separate from the body, fits in with Christian (specifically Puritan) ideas of separating oneself from the carnal world.

Within news articles, eyeball occasionally takes a more literal or scientific meaning, however, there are some instances that help define how Emerson uses the word. Various papers printed a brief report about a discovery from Charles Bell that showed that the eyeball ascends almost every time one’s eyelid is closed.³ While this was a scientific discovery, there is some significance of how eyes spend most (or a decent portion) of the time looking up, which almost

² "The Wreath. the King of Zion." Bangor Weekly Register (Bangor, Maine), 14 June 1817, p. [4]. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

³ "The Eye." Norwich Courier (Norwich, Connecticut), 23 July 1823, p. [1]. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

seems to imply looking up at God or a higher entity subconsciously. Since this study was widely reported and published before *Nature*, it's possible this contributed to the metaphorical connection between eyes and God.

In another news article, it is suggested that the blind and deaf will soon regain their full senses since the Pope is quoted as saying "He from thick films shall purge the visual ray / And on the sightless eye-ball pour the day." The article claims that this is indication that the words in Isaiah (which say that the deaf will hear, and the blind will see on a certain day) will come true soon.⁴ Again, eyeballs are used to signify a direct connection with God, but there is also an implied separation with the "thick films."

Emerson's experience as a transparent eye-ball which can see all and operate beyond the physical body bears a strong resemblance to an article published in 1822 which reviewed the potential of animal magnetism.⁵ One anecdote from the article notes how "a clairvoyant gave in her trance the construction of her own eyeball." Other researchers reported similar cases of describing anatomy perfectly, despite no prior knowledge. While the clairvoyant does not become an eyeball like Emerson, her ability to construct one indicates the significance of eyes within animal magnetism and reflects the ability to look inwards on what is normally impossible to see. Another female patient said, "I behold the interior of my own body; all its parts appear to me as it were transparent, and pervaded by a warm current of light." While this example does not directly draw comparisons to an eyeball, it shares the idea of being transparent as in *Nature*.

⁴ "The Deaf and Dumb." Boston Intelligencer (Boston, Massachusetts), and Morning & Evening Advertiser, 23 Nov. 1816, p. [2]. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

⁵ "Animal Magnetism. From the Port Folio, for July, 1822." Providence Patriot (Providence, Rhode Island), 20 July 1822, p. [1]. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

While Emerson's *Nature* does not reference animal magnetism, his experience within nature as an eyeball resembles anecdotal experiences with animal magnetism. Eyeballs and seeing are significant within the animal magnetism anecdotes, which all bear parallels to *Nature*. Considering this, along with the relative popularity of animal magnetism at the time, it is highly likely that Emerson used or read writings about animal magnetism when writing *Nature* and crafting the images of being an eyeball. However, while magnetism is centered on an unviewable pseudoscience, Emerson's experience is grounded in physical nature, which creates a groundwork that more people can relate to and easily follow.

The eyeball of a child plays a significant role in a letter a man wrote to a newspaper concerning a story he remembered from a friend.⁶ The letter tells the story of a man in Amsterdam who saw a woman begging on the street along with a blind, screaming child. After taking the child to the doctor, it was revealed that a bandage over their eye was holding a walnut shell containing a spider so that "the eyeball was completely exposed to the painful and poisonous attacks of the spider!!!". Here, the eyeball being the center of torture creates a graphic image (especially with the emphasis on "painful" and "poisonous") and illustrates a manifestation of fears concerning the growth of cities and consequently beggars. *Nature* rejects the value of city life in favor for the natural world – Emerson directly says the woods are "more dear and connate than in streets or villages." This article illustrates the vulnerability of the eyeball (and the fear associated with that vulnerability) and by becoming an eyeball, Emerson is becoming comfortable with that vulnerability. He can do this since he is freed from the dangerous city life, such as what is depicted in the article.

⁶ Democratic Press, 23 June 1816, p. 4. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania). Readex: America's Historical Newspapers

The image of a disembodied eyeball from *Nature* is like how an eyeball is presented in an excerpt from the novel “The Heroine.”⁷ The excerpt describes a man lying in bed, who sees a “winged eyeball ... flying about.” The eyeball figure is later described to be a “ghost” who “looked confused and adopted invisibility.” This story illustrates how a disembodied or transparent eyeball may have been a common literary trope when Emerson was writing. The ghost eyeball draws comparison to death, which is also present within *Nature*. Emerson describes being “uplifted into infinite space,” an image that evokes the ascension into heaven. With this context, the ending of *Nature* reads as a description of what the afterlife is like rather than any earthly experience.

Like most words today, eyeball does not have a singular meaning – however, in varying contexts, it can be tied to religion (either by seeing God or God’s eye), the out-of-body experiences from animal magnetism, fear, vulnerability, and death. Despite the relative contrasts of these contexts, they all tie into the varying messages and issues addressed in *Nature* and Emerson’s experience as an eyeball. In *Nature*, Emerson is utilizing a common 19th century literary motif of an eyeball to relay what is possible through being present in nature and rejecting traditional society.

⁷ "The Extravagance and Heroic Nonsense of Romance Writers and Novellists Are Admirably Burlesqued in the following Extract from 'the Heroine.'" *Palladium of Liberty* (Warrenton, Virginia), 18 June 1819, p. [4]. Readex: America's Historical Newspapers